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AUTHOR McCaul, Edward J.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

One traditional difficulty with dropout research has been finding a reliable base of information relative to dropouts. The High School and Beyond data base provides a unique opportunity to explore issues related to dropping out. This study used data from the High School and Beyond 1980 base-year survey, the second follow-up survey in 1984, and the 1986 follow-up survey to investigate the experiences of dropouts and high school graduates having no postsecondary education in 1986, 4 years after the projected date of graduation. Dropouts and graduates were compared on self-esteem, alcohol use, political and social participation variables, work satisfaction, salary of current job, periods of unemployment, and number of jobs. Multiple regression analyses were used to determine the degree to which dropping out explained the variance in these measures when gender, socioeconomic status, and academic achievement were held constant. Dropouts were found to differ little from graduates with no postsecondary education on many personal and social adjustment measures. Distinct differences between dropouts and graduates did emerge in alcohol use, some areas of political participation, number of jobs and periods of unemployment. The findings reinforce the conclusion that dropouts are less likely than high school graduates to participate in the mainstream of democratic life and in stable employment. (Author/NB)

Personal and Social Consequences of Dropping Out of School: Findings from High School and Beyond

Edward J. McCaul Gordon A. Donaldson, Jr. Theodore Coladarci

College of Education
University of Maine

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Abstract

The dropout problem has recently been the focus of considerable concern and the subject of much research. Nevertheless, a lack of careful and systematic assessment of the consequences of dropping out still exists. The purpose of the present study was to examine the personal and social consequences of dropping out of school. The High School and Beyond (HSB) data base was employed to investigate the experiences of dropouts and high school graduates having no postsecondary education in 1986, four years after the projected date of graduation. Specifically, dropouts and graduates were compared on (1) self-esteem, (2) alcohol use, (3) political/social participation variables, (4) work satisfaction, (5) salary of current job, (6) periods of unemployment, and (7) number of jobs. Multiple regression analyses were used to determine the degree to which dropping out explained variance in these measures when sex, socioeconomic status, and academic achievement were held constant. Dropouts were found to differ little from graduates with no postsecondary education on many personal and social adjustment measures.

Personal and Social Consequences of Dropping Out of School: Findings from High School and Beyond

Researchers, policy makers, and lay persons all have expressed increasing alarm over the social impact of public school dropouts (Levin, 1985, Mann, 1986, Ordovensky, 1987, Pallas, 1986). One of the more dire notes has been sounded by the National Dropout Prevention Center (1987): "By the year 2000, the number of students giving up on education will increase to about 40 percent or nearly 2,000,000. Tragically, most of these individuals will likely drop out of society, out of the work force, out of the American way of life".

Concern is even expressed from less politically involved constituencies. For example, Ransom (1986) states that "the problem affects everyone, and how the nation responds will help determine whether we create a permanent underclass or social cohesion, whether we will enjoy the fruits of our retirement or be destitute in our old age, and whether we will once again utilize our cities as places to live and work" (p.2). Because of the emphasis between public education and the process of becoming a productive citizen in society at large, failure in school perhaps has more lasting repercussions than failure in almost any other endeavor in our society.

Nevertheless, to begin to attack the "dropout problem", it is essential to more thoroughly assess both the short- and long-term consequences of dropping out. Some research has been accomplished in this regard. Levin (1972), using 1968 U. S. Census Bureau statistics, computed the total loss of income due to dropping out at $237.6 billion. Catterall (1985), in an update of Levin's study, estimated that in their lifetimes male graduates would earn $266,000 more than dropouts and female graduates $199,000 more than dropouts. Assuming a different perspective, Bachman, Wirtanen, and Green (1972) found that dropouts had lower self-esteem than graduates and that the difference remained equal in magnitude after students have dropped out. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) found that dropouts showed gains in self-esteem and sense of control over their lives, at least immediately after dropping out, that were equal to or greater than high school graduates. Other research has suggested that dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, to require public assistance, and to engage in crime (Rumberger, 1983). Still, as Rumberger (1987) has noted, "the consequences of dropping out deserve more attention from researchers and

policy analysts" (p. 16), and questions remain as to the personal, social, and economic consequences of dropping out.

One of the traditional difficulties with dropout research has been finding a reliable base of information relative to dropouts. Dropouts statistics have been difficult to evaluate due to differing definitions of dropouts, different methods of computing dropout rates, and erroneous reporting (Morrow, 1986). Other data sources, such as the U.S. Census Bureau, have been narrow in the scope of the questions asked. The High School and Beyond data base provides a unique opportunity to explore the issues related to dropping out. The care with which the stratified sample of almost 30,000 high school sophomores was chosen, and the wealth of information that was obtained, make the HSB data base an important source of information. The second and third follow-up questionnaires were designed to develop extensive information on the labor market experiences of both dropouts and high school graduates. In brief, it provides the opportunity to obtain detailed information on the social consequences of dropping out.

The present study examined the effects of dropping out on self-esteem, as well as on social, political, and work experience. Specifically, this study examined the following variables: (a) self-esteem, (b) alcohol use, (c) participation in political and social activities, (d) salary for current job, (e) work satisfaction, (f) extent of unemployment, and (g) number of jobs held.

Method

Data Source

The High School and Beyond (HSB) data from the 1980 base-year survey, the second follow-up survey in 1984, and the 1986 follow-up survey were used in the present study. The HSB survey involved a two-stage sampling design in which over 30,000 sophomores from more than 1,000 high schools were surveyed in the spring of 1980. Students who had dropped as well as those who continued toward their high school diploma were followed up in subsequent surveys.

The HSB data base contains sample weights that correct for oversampling of policy-relevant minorities and for nonresponse rates. For the present study, a modified version of the sampling weight was employed. The weight for the HSB cohort participating in both the base-year

and follow-up surveys (PANELWT4) was divided by the mean weight for these subjects. In this manner, oversampling and nonresponse were corrected while sample size was preserved.

Variables

Below, we briefly describe the variables in our analyses.

Dropout. Dropout, the primary independent variable, was defined as a student who left high school before graduating and, as of 1986, had not received a G.E.D. or taken any classes towards a high school diploma or G.E.D. In contrast, a high school graduate was defined as a student who graduated with the class in 1982, but had not attended any postsecondary school by 1986. The dropout variable was coded 0 (graduate), 1 (dropout).

Self-Esteem. The self-esteem scale comprises respondents' answers to the following items. I take a positive attitude toward myself (TY61A), I feel I am a person of worth, on an equal plane with others (TY61C), I am able to do things as well as most people (TY61J), and I do not have much to be proud of (TY61L). Responses were recoded so that high scores indicated positive self-esteem (Alpha reliability = .67).

Alcohol Use. The HSB third follow-up questionnaire contains five items relating to alcohol use: (a) How many days in the past month did you drink an alcoholic beverage? (TY62), (b) On how many days did you have six or more drinks? (TY63), (c) On the day that you had fewest drinks, how many did you have? (TY64A), (d) On the day that you had the most drinks, how many did you have? (TY64B), and (e) What is your average number of drinks per day? (TY64C). A composite variable of these five items was constructed, and its reliability assessed. The most reliable composite was based on these items (b, d and e above) and, consequently, composed the alcohol-use variable. (Alpha reliability = .86)

Political/Social Participation. Twenty-five social/political participation items were factor analyzed, resulting in seven orthogonal factors. Political Activity: The respondent's reported level of participation in working to help a candidate (TY55G), going to social-political gatherings (TY55F), giving money to candidates (TY55E), campaigning for a candidate (TY55D), joining a political club (TY59C), and becoming an officer of a political party (TY55H). Voting Behavior: Whether the respondent voted in an election between 3/1/84 and 2/1/86 (TY57),

voted in the 1984 presidential election (TY53), or is registered to vote (TY56). Political Discussions: Whether the respondent had discussed political problems with friends (TY55A), family (TY55B1), coworkers (TY55B2), or community leaders (TY55B3). Social/Group Participation: Whether the respondent had joined educational organizations (TY59J), community or social action groups (TY59E), volunteer work groups (TY59F), or a service organization (TY59K). Hobby, Club Participation: Whether the respondent had joined a literary or art club (TY59I); a social, hobby, or garden club (TY59C); or a voluntary group (TY59L). Sports Club Participation: Whether the respondent had joined a sports club (TY59H) or a youth club or little league (TY59A). Church or Trade Organizations: Whether the respondent had participated in church activities (TY59D); discussions of political problems with community leaders (TY55B3), or in union, trade, or fun organizations (TY59B).

Work Satisfaction. Participants were asked in the third follow-up survey to rate their satisfaction with 12 aspects of their most recent job. These items pertained to the pay and fringe benefits, importance and challenge, working conditions, opportunity for advancement with the employer, opportunity for advancement with the job, opportunity to use past training, security and permanence, satisfaction with supervisor, opportunity to develop new skills, job-related respect from family and friends, relationship with coworkers, and the job as a whole (TY14A to TY14L). Respondents rated these items on a Likert scale of 1 (Very satisfied) to 4 (Very Satisfied) (Alpha reliability = .89).

In addition to these measures of personal/social adjustment, three measures labor-market experiences were employed: salary, periods of unemployment, and number of jobs.

Salary. Both dropouts and graduates were asked to report their current salaries at the time of the third follow-up survey in 1986 (TY8HA). All reported wages were converged to an hourly scale. To eliminate obvious misreports and errors, these hourly wages were compared with individual's occupations (TY8A) and implausible salaries were eliminated. (For example, a secretary reporting an hourly wage of $75.00 was excluded from any further analyses.)

Periods of Unemployment. Respondents to the second and third follow-up survey were asked to report their employment status for each month from June 1982 to July 1986

(SY55A82A to SY55A84B, TY17A84C to TY17A86G). A composite variable was constructed that reflects the total number of months for which unemployment was reported. A high score on the measure (scale of 0 to 43) reflects more periods of unemployment.

Number of Jobs. Respondents to the second and third follow-up surveys also were asked to indicate the number of jobs they held between June 1982 and March 1986 (up to eight jobs, SY46A, SY47A, SY48A, SY49A, TY8A, TY9A, TY10A, and TY11A). (A high value on this variable reflects a greater number of jobs during this period.)

We employed six additional independent variables in our analyses. Sex: 1 (Male), 2(Female). Race: (1) Hispanic or Spanish, (2) American Indian, (3) Asian; (4) Black; (5) White; and (6) Other. Socioeconomic status: A composite father's occupation; (2) father's education; (3) mother's education; (4) family income; and (5) material possessions in the household. Academic Ability: Base-year achievement test scores in reading, vocabulary, and mathematics. Urbanicity: Whether the respondent's high school is urban, or central city, suburban, in a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), or rural, not in a SMSA. Geographic Region: New England and Mid-Atlantic states, East North Central and West North Central states, South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central states, West Mountain and Pacific states.

Results

First, preliminary differences between dropouts and graduates were examined on sex, race, urbanicity, geographic region, socioeconomic status, and academic ability (see Table 1). Dropouts were more likely to be Hispanic, from the South or West, and from urban areas. Graduates were more likely to be white, from the Northeast, and from suburban or rural areas. These findings are consistent with earlier results using the HSB data base (Barro & Kolstad, 1987). Dropouts also tended to be lower in academic achievement and socioeconomic status (SES). Here, we calculated an effect size (ES) for each mean difference: for academic achievement, ES = .47; for SES, ES = .33. That is, on academic achievement and SES, graduates were roughly one half of a standard deviation and one third of a standard deviation higher than dropouts, respectively.

These results also are consistent with earlier research (see, for example, Ekstrom et al., 1986, Peng, 1983, Rumberger, 1983).

A series of multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the effects of dropping out on (a) self-esteem, (b) alcohol use, (c) social/political participation variables, (d) work satisfaction, (e) salary, (f) periods of unemployment and (g) number of jobs. These measures of transitional adjustment were the dependent variables while dropout, sex, socioeconomic status, and academic ability served as the independent variables. (With the self-esteem dependent measure, base-year self-esteem also was entered as an independent variable.) These analyses allowed a determination of the effect of dropping out on the transition-adjustment variables while controlling for the influence of relevant basic background characteristics.

Results of these analyses are shown in Table 2. Because the dropout variable was dummy coded, the unstandardized regression coefficients (b) represent the mean difference between dropouts and graduates adjusted for the other independent variables. For example, b for the 1986 self-esteem measure is .30, indicating that the dropouts' mean self-esteem was roughly one-third of a point higher than the graduates' mean self-esteem. The beta values represent the standardized regression coefficients. According to Pedhazur (1982), any beta value greater than or equal to .05 may be considered meaningful.

As is evident from Table 2, dropouts displayed significantly higher self-esteem (b = .30) than graduates when the background factors of sex, socioeconomic status, and academic ability were controlled. While small, this finding contradicts the traditional argument that dropouts possess low self-esteem and, instead, suggests that dropouts' post-school experiences do not necessarily create or reinforce a sense of shame or failure. Given the generally strong societal sanctions against dropping out and the stereotypical view of a dropout as a "loser", this finding is somewhat puzzling.

In other areas, results indicated the possibility that dropouts may be experiencing more personal-social adjustment difficulties than graduates. For example, dropping out was associated with higher alcohol use. With sex, socioeconomic status, and academic ability held constant, the mean difference between dropouts and graduates on alcohol use was 2.04. However, this

difference must be interpreted cautiously. The unit of measurement for alcohol use reflects both the number of days of drinking per month as well as the number of drinks consumed per day. Whether a difference of two units on this measure is of theoretical importance is debatable (Pattison & Kaufman, 1982). Nonetheless, these results are a possible indication of personal-adjustment difficulties for those who dropped out.

Although no adjusted mean-differences were found in political activity (such as actively campaigning for a candidate), dropouts were lower in voting behavior ($b = -.29$) and participation in political discussions ($b = -.26$). Dropouts were also less likely to become involved with some community groups, such as sports clubs and church or trade organizations ($b = -.18$ for each). These results support the contention that dropping out, even when background factors are statistically controlled, contributes to less involvement in political and social processes. However, these effects are extremely small, if statistically significant.

In regard to the world of work, dropouts were lower in work satisfaction ($b = -1.10$) and, further, experienced more unemployment ($b = .99$). These results, then, suggested that staying in school may enhance an individual's chances for enjoying more satisfying and stable employment.

Interestingly, no significant effect of dropping out was obtained for wages. These results, as opposed to the findings on unemployment and number of jobs, are more consistent with the argument that dropping out is a symptom of previously existing problems and that the act of dropping out itself does not necessarily make matters worse (Bachman et al., 1972; Fine 1986).

Summary and Discussion

The results of this study are best viewed as exploratory. Certainly, the High School and Beyond data base provides a wealth of data on public school dropouts. For example, in this study, the responses of nearly 600 dropouts who participated in all four waves of the HSB survey were analyzed. Each survey consisted of nearly 100 items. The difficulties facing an individual researcher who wishes to collect comparable data are obvious.

This study suggests that the differences between graduates and dropouts within the first four years may not be as marked as we have been led to believe. They do not confirm policy

makers' or researchers' warnings that the act of dropping out leads to wide discrepancies in personal, social, and economic experiences.

Nevertheless, distinct differences between dropouts and graduates did emerge in alcohol use, some areas of political participation, number of jobs, and periods of unemployment. So, while the individual consequences of dropping out may be exaggerated, there is still cause for concern. This study reinforces the conclusion that dropouts are less likely to participate in the mainstream of democratic life and in stable employment than are high school graduates

These results also indicate the need to examine the consequences of dropping out using longitudinal data. While we found only small adverse effects of dropping out, it may be that the lasting consequences become evident later than four years after the projected date of graduation -- the time span of our study. Also, it may be that a lack of postsecondary education presents the most important life-adjustment obstacle for both dropouts and terminal degree graduates alike. Further research on these issues using longitudinal data bases is clearly indicated.

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Table 1

A Comparison of Dropouts and Graduates on Race, Sex, School Urbanicity, and High School Region

Category	Graduates Total N = 2048	Dropouts Total N = 587
	Percent	Percent
Race		
Hispanic	17.6	26.1
Am. Indian	1.2	1.4
Asian	.2	.1
Black	11.1	11.5
White	69.8	60.9
Sex		
Male	54.7	55.3
Female	45.3	44.7
Geographic Region		
Northeast	22.5	12.8
North Central	29.3	29.0
South	37.1	40.5
West	11.2	17.7
Urbanicity		
Urban	17.2	27.5
Suburban	43.9	37.2
Rural	38.9	35.3

Note: Actual N varied slightly depending upon analysis.

Table 2

A Comparison of Dropouts and Graduates on 1986 Transition-Adjustment Indicators: Effects of Background Factors Controlled

Measure	b	Beta	t
Self-Esteem (R^2 = .043)			
Dropout	.30	04	1.96*
Sex	-.28	-.05	-2.28*
SES	.13	.03	1.27
Achievement Test	.04	.09	4.00**
Self-Esteem in 1980	13	.17	7 40**
Alcohol Use (R^2 = .113)			
Dropout	2.04	.11	4.37**
Sex	-4.54	-.31	-12.11**
SES	.36	.03	1.19
Achievement Test	.01	.01	.43
Political Activity (R^2 = .009)			
Dropout	-.06	-.02	-1.03
Sex	-.03	-.01	-.68
SES	.11	.07	2.74**
Achievement Test	-.01	- 08	-3.39**
Voting Behavior (R^2 = .024)			
Dropout	-.29	-.12	-4.95**
Sex	.14	.07	-3.02**
SES	.10	.06	2.55**
Achievement Test	.00	.00	1.67
Political Discussions (R^2 = .043)			
Dropout	-.26	-.10	-4.53**
Sex	-.10	-.05	-2.17*
SES	.07	.04	1.88
Achievement Test	.02	.14	5.87**
Social/Group Participation (R^2 = .012)			
Dropout	-.02	-.01	-.30
Sex	.20	.10	4.44**
SES	.03	.02	.83
Achievement Test	-.01	-.04	-1.66

Measure	b	beta	t
Hobby, Club Participation (R^2 = .005)			
Dropout	.04	02	.65
Sex	-.11	-.05	-2.33*
SES	.03	.02	.67
Achievement Test	01	04	1.66
Sports Club Participation (R^2 = .023)			
Dropout	-.18	-.07	-3.05**
Sex	-.24	-.12	-5.24**
SES	05	03	1.30
Achievement Test	.00	02	1.04
Church or Trade Organization (R^2 = .007)			
Dropout	-.18	-.07	-2.93**
Sex	-.08	-.04	-1.70
SES	-.07	-.04	-1.66
Achievement Test	-.00	-.01	-.36
Work Satisfaction (R^2 = .022)			
Dropout	-1.10	-.07	-2.91*
Sex	-.76	-.06	-2.65**
SES	1.06	.10	4.32**
Achievement Test	-.04	-.04	-1.65
Salary (R^2 = .094)			
Dropout	.01	.00	.07
Sex	-1.45	-.23	-9.91**
SES	.75	.14	6.09**
Achievement Test	05	10	4.33**
Unemployment (R^2 = .030)			
Dropout	.99	.07	3.13**
Sex	.46	.04	1.74
SES	-1.25	-.13	-5.87**
Achievement Test	-.03	-.04	-1.81
Number of Jobs (R^2 = .022)			
Dropout	.20	.05	2.41*
Sex	-.35	-.11	-5.24**
SES	-.01	-.00	-.15
Achievement Test	.02	.09	4.02**

* = significant difference at the .05 level.
** = significant difference at the .01 level.